

Using Classroom Assessment to Improve Teaching

Assessment can be one of the most difficult aspects of teaching. The educational, emotional, and formative ramifications of judging a young person's work can weigh heavily on the mind of a teacher. But in spite of the anxiety it poses, knowing how to assess students in order to improve instruction is a core principle of effective teaching. One cause for assessment anxiety is confusion about what assessment means and about its purpose. In the minds of many community members and parents, assessment means test—especially a high-stakes state test. For students, assessment often is perceived as a means of competing with classmates for the highest grade instead of as a mile marker on the journey to increased knowledge and understanding. All assessments are created to serve some purpose, whether to diagnose a learning disability, to identify a student who needs remediation, or to determine whether a school district has met its achievement goals. However, no one assessment serves all of these purposes well. Standardized, summative assessments—those high-stakes tests—are designed to provide information on the performance of districts and schools so resources and support can be well targeted. But for classroom teachers, that information is incomplete. The results might tell teachers which students in their classes have not mastered a reading comprehension objective, but they do not tell what kind of instruction those students need to master the objective or what errors in thinking led to the incorrect answers. To get that kind of information, teachers need the results provided by the consistent use of classroom-based formative assessments.

This month's newsletter explains why ongoing, high-quality classroom assessments are so important and provides some suggestions for how they can be developed and used.

Why Classroom Assessment Matters

Collecting data on student understanding is an essential step in moving students toward full understanding of important concepts and standards. "Instruction and formative assessment are indivisible," say authors Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998, p. 143). "Assessment... refer[s] to all those activities undertaken by teachers—and by their students in assessing themselves—that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities.... [It is] formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs" (p. 140). The researchers found that strengthening formative assessments can raise student achievement overall and be especially helpful to low-achieving students (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Rick Stiggins, a national expert on classroom assessment, reflects a similar perspective. He suggests that educators replace their assessment of learning with a more balanced approach, using not only assessment *of* learning but also assessment *for* learning. That is, teachers should use assessment not only to actively and continuously measure a learner's progress but also to acquire useful data to inform their own instructional practice (Stiggins, 2004).

Using Assessment in the Classroom

Creating and using effective classroom assessments require skill and practice; however, the following guidelines can help teachers explore the practice of using assessment to improve instruction. Offering professional development in the design of high-quality classroom assessments is one way that schools and districts can support the application of these practices.

Start With the Standards

All assessments, whether devised in the classroom or administered by the state accountability office,

should be tied to a curriculum based on state academic content standards. As a first step, teachers should determine which state standards are assessed on the large-scale tests. Next, as author W. James Popham (2006) points out, there should be a careful analysis of the subskills and knowledge within those standards that students are supposed to master. This step is important if formative assessments are going to provide instructionally relevant information. Once this analysis is complete, teachers can work together to develop a “bank” of locally relevant lessons and formative assessment tasks that draw on different learning modalities.

Involve Learners in the Assessment Process

Involving the learner is at the heart of the shift from assessment that measures learning to assessment that promotes learning. Learners can be involved in assessment in several ways. They can be provided with rubrics or checklists that clearly explain the standard against which their work will be evaluated. Students also can be shown work that is excellent and work that needs improvement and can be given help analyzing the differences between them. Stiggins envisions “environments in which students use assessments to understand what success looks like and how to do better next time” (2004, p. 25).

Author Marilyn Burns (2005) advocates questioning as a formative assessment that involves students. Whether verbal or written, thoughtful questions can be used to probe student responses and elicit student reasoning. Flawed reasoning, she points out, can be found in both correct and incorrect student answers. This questioning strategy provides teachers with insights into student thinking that can guide their refinement of future lessons. It also helps students reflect on their own thought processes, a practice called metacognition.

Provide High-Level Instructional Feedback

Although teacher feedback can be observed in almost every classroom, its use does not always serve as an effective classroom assessment tool. “There are clearly recorded examples... in which teachers have, quite unconsciously, responded in ways that would inhibit the future learning of a pupil. What the examples have in common is that the teacher is looking for a particular response and lacks the flexibility or the confidence to deal with the unexpected. So the teacher tries to direct the pupil toward giving the expected answer” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 143). In contrast, high-quality instructional feedback is timely, useful, and appropriate. Timely feedback—given as soon as possible after the assessment occurs—can influence the next steps in the learning process. Useful feedback, says author Thomas Guskey (2005), is “both diagnostic and prescriptive. It reinforces precisely what students were expected to learn, identifies what was learned well, and describes what needs to be learned better” (p. 6). Whether verbal or written, instructional feedback should go beyond indicating the degree of right and wrong to include advice on how the learner can improve next time.

Compile and Analyze Assessment Results

Data that result from a regularly administered variety of formative assessments can provide teachers with reams of information about their instruction, what worked, what did not, and what to do next. Neither the formative assessment nor the data need to be elaborate. Teachers can compile student responses to find out which students are missing achievement targets and how. Often patterns or trends will emerge when teachers ask and answer questions, such as “Are all of my students making the same kind of error?”; “Do their mistakes show that they don’t have the background knowledge they need to understand this new content?”; or “Could my students demonstrate understanding if the

question format were changed?" Constructing formative assessments so that "in a given set of items, the wrong-answer options reveal specific student misunderstandings" (Popham, 2006, p. 86) can yield precise indicators to guide teacher follow-up instruction.

Differentiate Corrective Instruction

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of using formative assessments is knowing what to do with the results. Results that indicate a student has not learned an important concept or skill call for corrective instruction and additional opportunities for the student to demonstrate learning. "To be optimally effective, correctives must be qualitatively different from the initial teaching," says Thomas Guskey (2005, p.6). "Little variation in the teaching result[s] in great variation in student learning" (p. 2). If direct instruction was used for the initial lesson, a corrective lesson that makes use of manipulatives or a kinesthetic activity might be appropriate. Students can be grouped so that those who demonstrated understanding are provided with enrichment activities while those who need additional time are provided with follow-up instruction. Alternatively, pairing high- and low-achieving students for a cooperative activity can benefit both learners as well. The aim is to reach all students by using a variety of teaching strategies.

Conclusion

With the spotlight of accountability focused so intensely on summative exams, it is easy to be distracted from the importance of regular, formative classroom assessments. Each has a place in the educational system, but each serves a different purpose. Using effective formative assessment strategies can empower both teachers and learners. For teachers, making an investment in formative assessment similar to the investment that states and districts have made in summative assessment can yield dividends in student achievement.

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